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Chapter 6

Advancing to Secondary School

6.1 Introduction

Linda: What are the differences between the Kantlijn and the new school?

Jenna: Too many. Everything actually.

Roos: I've forgotten.

(...)

Linda: And Roos, you said like 'I've already actually forgotten it'?

Roos: Well look... In primary school... [At a certain moment you feel it], so that's boring and all.

Marisol: But then... But at the beginning, the first week in secondary school, you really had something like 'oh my God, what do I do', but then later that was really normal, then you're through it a bit, that you've forgotten at primary school. [Focus group 1, 6 February 2007]

This project followed a group of girls in their transition from the 8th form to secondary school, on the assumption that identity performances change drastically in this transition. When I met the girls several months after primary school, they had obviously changed physically. Some had grown taller; all but a few had lost some childish features. It was clear to me they had entered a different biological phase. The question thus arose: what were the differences in identity performance between primary and secondary school?

Whilst still in the 8th form, most girls were anxious about advancing to secondary school. They expressed their nerves and tried to prepare as best they could. When I talked about differences in the focus group interviews, their anxiety had gone. As the above quote shows, the girls expressed differences ("everything actually"), yet at the same time, they

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were unable to discuss differences. Marisol and Roos explained they had forgotten what primary school was like, and they were therefore unable to discuss change. Although the girls discussed practical changes, they did not express changes in themselves. This outcome was puzzling: contrary to my expectations, and their expectations a year earlier, secondary school did not entail a clear change performance. In this chapter, I analyse the differences between primary and secondary school. In addition, I investigate their perception of a lack of difference. I argue that a repertoire of authenticity allows the girls to handle this transition, simultaneously impeding them from articulating identity differences. This makes such an investigation methodologically problematic. The chapter starts with the changing school levels, which in the Netherlands means facing one's position in the intelligence hierarchy. I then analyse the differences the girls perceived. After that, I discuss new friends and the popularity hierarchy. In the conclusion, I discuss these results in light of the above: how to account for the lack of self-reported changes in identity?

6.2 The intelligence hierarchy

The key difference between primary and secondary school in the Netherlands is the division of pupils into separate levels. At primary school, pupils of dissimilar abilities are in class together, but after primary school pupils are divided by ability. Figure 6.1 shows the different levels of education after secondary school¹.

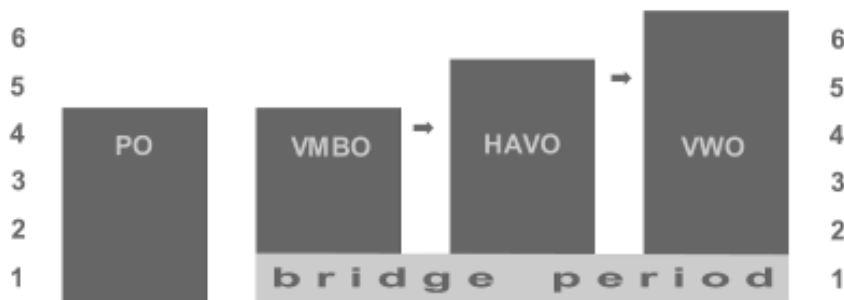


Figure 6.1: The Dutch secondary education system

PO stands for *PraktijkOnderwijs* [Practical Education], a level for pupils who need extra guidance. It has a strong focus on practice-based learning. *VMBO*, *Voorbereidend Middelbaar BeroepsOnderwijs*, is Lower Secondary Professional Education. This level is split again into three levels of varying difficulty. The lowest level has a more practical focus, the highest a more theoretical focus. *HAVO*, *Hoger Algemeen Voortgezet*

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Onderwijs [Higher General Secondary Education] is the middle level. Finally, *VWO*, *Voorbereidend Wetenschappelijk Onderwijs*, denotes Pre-University Education, the highest level. Since the 1970s, Dutch secondary schools have undergone a period of mergers, resulting in large secondary schools wherein different levels are offered. Thus, some schools include VMBO, HAVO and VWO levels², further enabling mobility. Generally, each level starts with a one (or two) year bridge period called *brugklas*, when the secondary school evaluates a pupil's abilities, and can decide to promote or demote him/her to another level. When finished with a level, upward mobility is possible, so after graduating VMBO, a student can move on to the fourth year of HAVO (see arrows in the figure).

The primary school (i.e. the teacher of the 8th form) advises which level is best for a pupil. This advice is based on the pupil's educational achievements over the years. The teacher formalises the advice in January and it is discussed with the pupils and parents. The CITO test is the nationally used placement exam which determines the level of secondary education. Secondary schools accept a pupil based on a combination of the advice and the CITO scores. In Amsterdam, schools are allowed to exempt from the test pupils with the lowest educational ability (De Regt, 2004). Thus, if the teacher suggests Practical Education or VMBO with special assistance, this pupil does not need to take the CITO test. Possible CITO scores range between 500 and 550, and secondary school levels are connected to ranges of scores (e.g. 532-541 is the HAVO interval). Throughout the 7th and 8th forms, pupils practice the CITO test, further enabling teachers to provide measured advice. The official CITO test is taken in February and results arrive in March. Thereafter, pupils check out various secondary schools to help them to make their choice³.

The 8th form is a crucial year because henceforth the division of pupils into different levels is official. Although pupils are generally aware of differences in intellectual capabilities before year 8, the official division makes such an understanding inescapable (see also De Regt, 2004). At the two schools, future life chances and different abilities were not central in everyday life. The CITO test abruptly forced onto the girls a discourse of differentiation and distinction based on intelligence. Not only faced with their own (in)abilities, they were also confronted with their place in the 'intelligence hierarchy'. Future dreams are connected to identity, as they form the narrative about self one would like to tell in the future. Thus, facing the hierarchy had consequences for the girls' understandings of their identities, both now and in the future.

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Facing the hierarchy for the first time

At the Gunningschool, the teacher, Thomas, communicated his advices in January, during evening meetings with pupils and parents. I learned about the advices through Thomas, who informed me all but one boy had received a VMBO or lower advice. He told me the pupils were not that let down however, amongst the pupils, I noticed disappointment and envy. Several girls bombarded me with questions about their opportunities after secondary school. For instance, Beyhan sought me out specifically to ask if she could still become a flight attendant with a VMBO theoretical advice. Gülen wanted to become a physician and had also got a VMBO theoretical advice. She wanted to know if her dreams needed shattering. Before the official advice, these girls had realised not everyone was equally adept, but they had hitherto been unaware of the consequences of these differences.

The test results came out on a Tuesday, a day I always attended the Kantlijn. The teacher, Luck, had informed all the pupils and parents of their advice, but the pupils were nervous about the 'official' verdict. Luck told the class that test scores too are just an indication, but quantification lends a notion of evidence. The year before, two boys had got into a fight when, based on a one-point difference in score, one called the other dumb. Luck told me some parents disagreed with the advice he had given their offspring, wanting them to be at the highest level possible⁴. Parents transferred their anxiety about the CITO test to their children, and some pupils were promised presents if their score exceeded the original advice. A test score at a higher level than the given advice may lead to acceptance onto a higher level at secondary school. Conversely, a lower score can result in a lower level. Indeed, one girl performed under the level Luck had advised for her. When she saw her score, she started crying, feeling her world had ended. All pupils eagerly compared their scores, and those with high scores received praise.

At the Gunningschool, according to Thomas, the test scores were received calmly and without ado. When I saw the pupils on the Thursday after, they did not talk about the scores, nor did they converse about new secondary schools. This class was more homogenous in educational level, i.e. the majority had received a similar, low advice. The intelligence hierarchy was virtually absent within the class. Furthermore, these girls had already taken the blow when the advices were communicated. As I argued in the previous chapter, the parents of the Kantlijn children were highly involved and they questioned Luck's advice. At the Gunningschool, defying the authority of the teacher was

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less common. However, some girls later expressed their distrust of Thomas' advice. An example: Aliye had been given an advice for Praktijkonderwijs and she attended this level at secondary school. When I saw her again, in February 2007, her new school had informed her that she had the ability to attend VMBO and she was going to switch to this level the next year. She and Nazli saw this as proof of Thomas' 'racism', claiming he had purposely given everyone too low an advice in order to hold them back.

Living the hierarchy

Once in secondary school, differences in levels and ability become part of daily life. In large schools with different levels, the girls befriended pupils from the various levels and comparison was of the order of the day. Intelligence, and a sense of connection with those on one's level, had become a part of identity. Gülen was one of the girls I visited at her new school. I talked to her, two female friends, and Ibrahim, a classmate from the Gunningschool. Gülen had a higher score than the advice Thomas had given her, and she was placed in a 'HAVO opportunity class' [HAVO-kansklas]. They talked about stupid and smart people:

Gülen proudly told me she received an excellent report card. Ibrahim, who was in a VMBO theoretical class, repeatedly said Gülen was smart and he was stupid. He made remarks about former classmates Nazli and Aliye, saying they were *really* stupid. Gülen went along with Ibrahim. She recalled an occasion when Nazli was drooling in class. They all laughed about this. [Secondary school visit Gülen, 5 December 2006]

Gülen was a quiet girl at the Gunningschool, and Ibrahim the class' menace. A year before, I would not have believed the two could share a conversation, let alone be close to friends. At the Gunningschool, Gülen was good friends with Nazli and Aliye. They now attended Praktijkonderwijs and therefore received Gülen and Ibrahim's mockery. This mocking of 'more stupid' peers functioned as a unifier for Gülen and Ibrahim, as they underlined their shared higher position in the intelligence hierarchy. In a different setting, Gülen would have probably mocked Ibrahim in turn, but in the same room, she performatively united with him. Later, whilst I was planning the focus groups, Gülen enquired, with much interest, how Nazli was doing, and she asked to be in the same focus group. Thus, the performance of friendship or alliance with Ibrahim, and the performance of friendship or interest in Nazli caused Gülen to behave in almost oppositional ways.

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6.3 Perceived differences

The girls indeed looked different once in secondary school, but I wanted to know which differences they perceived. I put this question to the girls in the focus groups. Note that the nature of a focus group leads to collectively constructed answers, in other words: answers are produced in negotiation. When I asked the girls what they thought were the main differences between secondary school and primary school, their answers ranged from 'nothing' to 'everything'. Interestingly, only one group (out of five), volunteered differences in personality. Amisha said she had become more insolent, after which Bianca added she was now more self-assured. The other groups did not offer up any personality changes. Faced with this absence of perceived personality differences⁵, I asked the girls in the last group whether they felt they had changed. They answered dismissively. In this excerpt, Mette answers my question reluctantly:

Linda: And do you feel you yourselves have changed?

[Silence]

Mette: Hmm. A little bit. You're more yeah... I'm more er... I don't know. Got own opinion.

Linda: Yes?

Mette: Yes, but other than that nothing much has changed. Well, I do less. I do less actually than at primary school. [Focus group 5, 8 May 2007]

Mette felt she had got more of her own opinions, however, she did not elaborate and swiftly moved on to talk about the practical change of 'doing less'. She explained that she was more tired coming home from school and therefore engaged in fewer social activities. Likewise, all the other groups volunteered only practical changes. These cluster into three categories.

First, the girls mentioned differences in infrastructure. They noticed they had more books and a heavier bag, more teachers spread over different classrooms, et cetera. Maud answered my question:

Maud: Well, I now go to a Montessori school so now I have to work in six weeks and you have to plan all that. And er, well, in any case, it is a much larger school and there are more children.

Linda: How do you notice it is so big?

Maud: Well actually it's not that big because I'm in the D building and that is, that's somewhat bigger than the Kantlijn was. (...) And then there's the B building and the E building and the A building and the C building. [Focus group 2, 12 February 2007]

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Maud had changed school types and the Montessori method requires a different mode of working. Furthermore, in her answer she elaborated on the different buildings, about which it must have been important for her to show her knowledge.

Second, the girls noticed how they spent their time differently. The morning and lunch breaks were very different from playtime and lunch at primary school, and they also spent these with less adult supervision. Furthermore, they had more homework, which put significant constraints on their leisure time.

Third, the girls talked about differences in social interaction. Again, they were pragmatic, as they mentioned there were simply more children and teachers at the new school. The girls also talked about new friends and altered friendships. More children affect opportunities for friendships, and one's place in the popularity hierarchy. I return to this in the following sections. It is noteworthy that the girls from the Gunningschool mentioned they now had more interaction with boys. This meant not they got romantically involved, as almost all the girls from both schools considered themselves to be too young for this. It was, simply, an inevitability after the strict division between boys and girls at the Gunningschool. For instance, Laila told me boys and girls were obliged to sit next to each other at her new school.

The girls thus concentrated on very practical changes. Infrastructural differences made a manifest difference in the girls' lives. Their emphasis on such practicalities as 'having lockers now' reflects a changed everyday life. The girls' world had changed in a very practical way, but this had fundamental consequences. Remember how the girls at the Gunningschool viewed their drawers as 'their space'. Being part of a large school, with up to 1800 students and different classrooms all day, requires a different attachment to the building than at primary school. In this next excerpt, the girls explain how practical changes have fundamental consequences:

Marisol: To me, it seems really very weird if you... If you'd go to primary school and they say: 'okay, go sit at your table and...

Jenna [agreeing]: If I'd had to... yes. And then with a drawer...

Marisol: Now you have everything in your bag, and all, and...

Jenna: Or in your locker.

Noa: So you have to [go to] all different classrooms. You go to a different classroom all the time. And you keep on having different teachers. And, and when you have a break you're not, like, with your teacher or something.

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Then you don't go outside, or something. Then you can just go to the cafeteria, or you can go outside yourself, or to the Albert Heijn [supermarket chain].

Linda: Yes. Does it matter that there's no teacher present during breaks?

?: That's just fun.

Jenna: But also, in a certain way, I feel we're freer in secondary school, but then also not. I mean, in primary school you sometimes had to go outside and you couldn't stay inside. But in secondary school you have to make your homework and you have to do all this and then some more, what you didn't have to do in primary school. [Focus group 1, 6 February 2006]

The changes the girls mentioned point to three changes for identity performance. First, the different infrastructure and routines changed the girls' manoeuvrability and their opportunity to engage in different performance practices. Chapter 8 focuses on performance practices, but here I want to mention that more freedom and manoeuvrability means more time to talk, more opportunities to listen to and share music et cetera. Second, as a variety of teachers teach different courses, teachers' have less control over pupils. The girls felt they had gotten more autonomy over their actions in secondary school, but with that autonomy came responsibility. The girls were thus addressed, and hence positioned, differently by their secondary schools: now, they were positioned (more) as teenagers than as children. Third, as Bianca and Amisha's stories indicated, the change of setting and the different audience opened up the possibility of showing a different side of self. Bianca saw herself as being freed from the terror she had encountered at the Gunningschool. Amisha had slowly transformed from a quiet, shy girl into a more spontaneous tomboy the year before. Yet, at her new school, she told me she was more outgoing and had even got into a fight once.

6.4 Changes in friendship

Friendships that have been close throughout primary school can vanish almost overnight when girls enter secondary school. As the girls saw each other less often, friendship faded. Since most girls lived close to their old primary school, they often ran into their old classmates in the neighbourhood. When I met Nazli and Aliye at their new school, I asked them if they continued to see their former classmates. They met my question with an enumeration of the girls they had seen:

Aliye often sees Laila at the bus stop. They sometimes see Romeysa at the mall. Nazli lives in the same building as Radia. Nazli tells she saw Conso-lacion once at the Albert Heijn, Aliye saw her at the Dekamarkt [both are supermarkets]. [Secondary school visit Nazli and Aliye, 29 November 2006]

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Aliye and Nazli were keen to be exhaustive in their enumeration; however, this revealed that they only met these former friends by chance. They no longer made plans with them, nor did they hang out together when they met on the street. Nonetheless, to Aliye and Nazli it was important to point out that these girls had not disappeared from their lives either. In sum: although there was a break in social contacts, in their reflections about this issue, the girls emphasised continuity.

The girls did not mourn the loss of these friendships, as they perceived it to be a natural and logical change. Furthermore, as Aliye and Nazli confirmed, their former classmates had not disappeared suddenly. As well as seeing each other in their neighbourhood, most girls still chatted on MSN6. Mette explained why this was not, however, enough to maintain a strong friendship.

Mette sees her old friends less because she made new friends. She does not make new appointments with them, which is the main reason according to her. Now it is just asking questions: how is school, how was your school report? But it is no longer about 'do you like so and so', because you don't know all the new people they've met. And that kind of talk was the real fun.
[Secondary school visit Mette, 28 November 2006]

Since most were at separate new secondary schools, the girls no longer shared the same friends, and therefore had less to discuss. The girls that comprised focus group 1 attended the same new school, but they were spread over different levels and their friendship had changed. Since they knew the same people, their focus group interview was like a gossip session. Again, knowing the same people is crucial for friendship, because gossip is a favoured conversation topic.

New friends

In this subsection, I analyse how the girls understood new friendships. Most girls were nervous about making new friends, but after the transition to secondary school, they argued their nerves had been unwarranted. In primary school, the girls had already shared their anxiety with me. Sophie, for instance, repeatedly expressed her fears. She worried about her first day, especially because her mother insisted on taking her to school and she feared this would permanently damage her image. She did not know anyone who was to attend the same school and she worried about new friends. Her report about the first day at school starts with a long 'AAAAH', after which she described how nervous she was. She was keen on making a good impression and agonised about her

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appearance. When I visited her at her secondary school, she told me her nervousness had been in vain. Interestingly, she added that it was “nothing like in those American movies”, referring to American high school movies⁷.

Although most girls agonized about it beforehand, in the focus groups they all said making new friends was easy⁸. To stay with Sophie: she was alone on the first day and she worried others already knew each other, leaving her the only person by herself. To Sophie’s great horror, the “biggest nerd of the class” sat down next to her:

Sophie: I sat next to the biggest nerd of the class [laughter], that was my experience. Some guy sat down next to me right away: hello! And then ‘hi, ha’. (...) No but, now it turns out he’s not a nerd, but not the hunk of the class [either].

Linda: Yes.

Sophie: But he sat down there, and then another guy sat down next to me and he was a bit like, I don’t know, and looking at everybody and oh! I felt a bit uncomfortable because no one knows you and you sit there... Yes indeed, you think what am I doing here, but it wasn’t so bad...

Linda: And when you look back at that? Did you have that too, Thirza?

Thirza: Oh no, I just sat, you know, I just sat... We sat in rows and all of a sudden all these girls sat next to me and they starting to talk to me and we were a real club right away and I thought ‘okay’, then I thought er... yes.

Sophie: They were lucky; they had an introduction day the day before they went to school. In the evening. [Focus group 2, 21 February 2007]

Sophie felt disadvantaged, because the person next to her was not friendship material in her eyes. Sophie said she judged people on appearance, especially in the first weeks. The boy with whom she was so uncomfortable turned out to be not that bad. Sophie also remarked Thirza was lucky, because she had had an introduction in advance. The girls stressed the importance of such events, because friendships sometimes form haphazardly. Having had the introduction before the actual first day, Thirza had the advantage of already gaining some friends. Secondary schools facilitate acquaintances by organising events like a freshmen introduction day or camp. Sometimes these happened later in the year, thus providing possibilities for new alignments and new friends.

Making friends might have been easy, but friendships did not form as randomly as might appear from the girls’ statements. Although Amsterdam secondary schools are more mixed than Amsterdam primary schools, ethnicity is an important divider and most girls flocked to ‘their own’ ethnicity. The girls of non-Dutch origin all described the cliques at their schools in terms of ethnicity. Caruna wrote in her first day of school

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report: “Now I have one new friend who happens to be of the same descent as I am”. Likewise:

Aliye: But then we had look, an introduction day. So then this girl came, she said ‘yes, are you Turkish’ and all, how old are you, yes, actually like that, yeah, that’s how you make friends.

Linda: People just come up to you and they ask some stuff?

Aliye: Yes. [Focus group 3, 27 February 2007]

Aliye’s example shows the same random pattern that Sophie feared when the ‘nerd’ sat down next to her: the first person you meet can be your lifelong friend. However, the girl’s first question was “are you Turkish” and that one question established a sense of togetherness, of shared identity. We then discussed whether it was important that friends have the same background:

Linda: And with you they asked if you were Turkish? Is that important, that your friends are also Turkish?

Nazli: Yes.

Linda: Yes Nazli, why?

Aliye: For me not really.

Laila: No for me neither, as long as they’re sweet and nice, funny.

Linda: And [name of new friend mentioned earlier], is she a Moroccan girl?

Laila: No, Turkish.

Linda: Turkish. And you Nazli, you said to me it is important.

Nazli: Yes.

Linda: Can you tell a bit more about that?

[Laughter]

Nazli: What is it [directed to the other girls]? I don’t know, I just think it’s important.

Linda: Yes, and could you also be friends with a Dutch girl?

Nazli: Yes.

[Laughter]

Linda: And with Moroccan girls?

Nazli: Yes.

Linda: But do you feel, why is it important then that someone is Turkish?

[Laughter]

Nazli: You ought to know which culture they have and all. [Focus group 3, 27 February 2007]

Laila interjected that she did not find it important to have friends with backgrounds comparable to her own. This is part of a politically correct repertoire (see §10.2), as Laila said it is more important that friends are sweet and funny, namely character above anything else. The girls’ awareness of the delicacy of this topic also manifested itself in their laughter.

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Still, Laila's new best friend did have a similar background, as Turks and Moroccans in the Netherlands share the same religion and are faced with the same prejudices in this multicultural society. Girls of Turkish and Moroccan descent befriended each other sooner than they befriended girls of Dutch origin. Nazli explained why shared heritage is important to her: because then you know which culture they have, i.e. several things are already understood. My query into possible friendships with Dutch girls was met with a yes, even though Nazli had just stressed the importance of shared heritage. Shared heritage facilitates friendship, but most were reluctant to exclude other nationalities. Since Nazli had no Dutch friends, her unwillingness to exclude Dutch girls possibly had to do with my Dutch ethnicity or possibly with a politically correct repertoire.

The conversation continued with an interjection from Consolacion, where she negotiated Nazli's position by saying she could not be friends with Dutch girls:

- Consolacion: I don't go about with *tata's*.
Linda: You don't go about with *tata's*?
Laila [overlapping]: I do.
Consolacion: No, Dutch people no.
Linda: No, why not?
Consolacion: I don't know.
Laila: Why? That's what you are yourself, right?
[Laughter]
Consolacion: No. [Focus group 3, 27 February 2007]

Consolacion experienced her ethnicity as Spanish-Colombian (see appendix II). Laila and Consolacion were close friends in the 8th form, which made it even more remarkable that Laila did not know Consolacion's descent. However, Latinas are a minor minority in the Netherlands and possibly the other girls did not therefore recognise it, whereas Turks and Moroccans are more easily recognised.

Cultural differences play a role in friendship. For instance, Sophie judged closeness in terms of having been at someone's house. Likewise:

- Maud: But I didn't really think I would get to know all these people and all, that it would really become my class. But now it's all really familiar, well not as familiar as they [referring to Madelief-Sophie-Thirza] are now, but er still really, not with everyone and all, but with the most I find. Yeah, have been at many people's houses and all and it's already really close. [Focus group 2, 21 February 2007]

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Coming over and having sleepovers is common amongst the Dutch girls, but almost absent amongst the Muslim girls. This adds an extra hurdle to the possibility of mixed friendships. The girls of Dutch origin downplayed the importance of ethnicity as a dividing force. When I visited her school, I asked Thirza about multicultural relations at her school. She replied her class had people from Morocco, Turkey, Indonesia, Surinam and Egypt. The rest were “normal”. When I pushed her about this, it turned out that “normal” meant autochthonous Dutch.

With all the new faces, secondary school provides opportunities to make new friends and to build a new circle. The girls perceived making new friends as a random process. The randomness of making new friends shows how much friendship is performative: the person that sits next to you and talks to you is your possible friend. When you continue to sit next to that person and continue to talk, the repetitive performance produces the friendship. However, friendships actually do not form completely randomly, as some girls interjected that they judged on appearances in the first weeks, and other girls (un)consciously befriended girls from comparable backgrounds. Note also that the girls only discussed other girls, indicating that friendships with boys were not an option.

6.5 The popularity hierarchy

In section 5.5, I discussed the ways in which the girls understood popularity when they were in primary school. Popularity was defined as having many friends or having a favourable appearance. Most girls indicated at that time they thought popularity would be more important in secondary school than it was in primary school. In this section, I first discuss cliques and the popularity hierarchy at secondary school. After that, I analyse the ways the girls talked about the differences in popularity.

The girls distinguished several groups (or cliques), however, this varied strongly per girl. A shared classification system did not exist, as the girls used different words to designate non-overlapping groups. Here is the full list of Dutch designations, with the English explanation in brackets if necessary:

alto's [alternatives];	gewonen [regulars];	populieren [populars];
barbies;	gothics;	sletjes [sluts];
bitches;	kakkers [preppies];	sufjes [boring people];
brutalen [cheekies];	nerds;	tutjes [prissy people];
gangstas;	normalen [normal people];	

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In addition, they named groups who like the same music (but without a specific subcultural designation), and groups who share the same ethnic descent. Consensus existed only about nerds, a term the girls used solely to designate boys. Nerds are discussed in-depth in section 10.5 on normalcy.

The girls did not see any group distinctions based on musical preference other than goths. This might be due to a post-modern blurring of style (Muggleton, 2000), or perhaps such identities do not occur until later in adolescence (Ter Bogt, 1997). I therefore enquired whether the girls thought such groups existed amongst seniors. Both Maud [group 2] and Mette [group 5] argued that pupils in the senior levels dress more alike.

Maud: Yeah, in junior forms you still pay a lot of attention to what you're wearing and all, you pay a lot of attention. Well actually not, well you do try your own style, what you like to wear and what you don't. And yes those sorts of things and... But in the senior levels especially... My sister and her friends, they just want to get out of school as quickly as possible, they have their own clothes or something, but actually those are more, you don't really see a difference between... [Focus group 2, 21 February 2007]

For these freshmen, senior life is a lifetime away, even if their siblings live in that faraway world. As I did not investigate seniors, and recent ethnographic studies about subcultures in the Netherlands lack, the existence of such groups remains an empirical question. For the girls in this study though, subcultural identities based on popular music genres, like hip hop or rock, played no part in their lives.

Changes in the importance of popularity

When the girls were still in primary school, most of them argued that popularity would become more important in secondary school. The majority of girls argued that at secondary school, there are more children who previously did not know you. As Naoul said:

Because at first [in secondary school], you don't know the children. If you become popular they talk more about you and they get to know you more. But if they know you already, you don't need to be popular anymore. Like here. Here, everybody knows me. So I don't need to be popular anymore. [Interview Naoul, 30 June 2006]

Primary school was a safe environment, where the girls knew where they stood. Faced with an insecure prospect, the girls increasingly feared

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standing alone or being bullied. Popularity was thought to be more important in secondary school because there are more children in secondary school, and these children are also older. When specifically asked if this had anything to do with the start of puberty (as is often assumed within developmental psychology, see Lesko (1996)), the girls hesitated to answer – they said ‘yes’, but could not elaborate, or they said they did not know.

Once in secondary school, I asked the girls if popularity had become more important. Like their answers to my questions about the importance of popularity in primary school, the girls favoured ‘being yourself’ and ‘having some friends’ over popularity. Again, we thus see a continuance rather than a breach in the girls’ performances about popularity. However, a closer reading of their answers shows that popularity indeed became a more governing criterion in secondary school. In response to my question, the girls turned the conversation to specific people in their class, to whom popularity was either too important, or who were too unpopular. Talking about others instead of oneself is a manoeuvre that makes it possible to preserve authenticity. The girls especially mentioned that appearances were now more firmly judged by others. Mette explained some rules for popularity:

I ask Mette if popularity has become more important. She answers yes, you need to wear “good clothes” now, because there are more people and people “look at each other more”. Good clothes are jeans, and trainer pants are no good. She therefore doesn’t wear these anymore. It is also important to be more ‘groomed’. Mette often wears a knitted cap when she cycles to school, which makes her hair look messy, but that is okay. She says it is important not to wear your backpack too low, which means no lower than the top of your pants. Some people have their pack at their thighs, which is bad. Girls wear the pack over one shoulder; boys hold it in their hands. Mette pays attention to this, also to the brand of the backpack. Eastpack is a good brand, and backpacks with more than one front pouch are bad. She doesn’t carry many books in her pack, but keeps them in her locker. [Secondary school visit Mette, 28 November 2006]

Mette was a tomboy and never really paid much attention to appearances in the 8th form. In secondary school she was still a tomboy, but she did also adjust her performance. As I discuss further in chapter 7, being attentive to appearance and looking well-groomed [verzorgd] was deemed more important than being pretty. Mette’s backpack example shows how there are unwritten rules for appearances⁹. Knowledge about these rules determines your place in the popularity hierarchy.

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At some points, the girls indicated they adhered to the rules of popularity, at other points they rejected such rule following behaviour. Their statements thus sometimes conflicted:

Linda: And Sophie, do you feel appearance has become more important?

Sophie: Er, er, well no not really. It's not like you need to have a certain brand or anything, but you do see that you, er, well for instance, in our class a lot of people had Björn Borg underwear for a while.

?: All these boxers.

Sophie: Well, that's nice and all, but er, I'm not gonna spend my money on that, then I'll just wear different underpants you know. Or some also, then she has – then she says 'I don't feel good if I don't wear underpants with something nice on them' or something. Then I think, yeah, you wear pants over them... Well, I think that's nonsense. I don't find it that important, because you want to look kind of nice, or something, but I'm not going to adjust my clothing style to my class[mates], definitely not.

Madelief: No, I'm not doing that either. I'm not retarded or anything. [Focus group 2, 21 February 2007]

Sophie stated she would not adjust her clothing style for her classmates, an action Madelief labelled "retarded". However, earlier in the focus group, Sophie had discussed how she judged her classmates based on appearance. I asked her if she too considered being the subject of other people's possible judgement:

Linda: Okay, did you take into account that other people would judge you like that too?

Sophie: Yes, definitely.

All: Yes, didn't we?

Maud: Only your best clothes on and all... [Focus group 2, 21 February 2007]

Context is important here. This previous excerpt comes from a part in the interview where the girls discussed how they judged others. They were aware they would be judged in turn. To say they were not would be untrue and illogical, hence inauthentic. Maud also stated she had had conversations with classmates about their first impressions: what did you think of X when you first saw her. Such conversations are examples of the reflexive project in action. The first excerpt is actually an example of such as a conversation: Sophie reflected on designer underwear, and why it is silly to wear this or to give weight to this. In this more reflective context, she again stressed authenticity. To say she would subscribe to a silly practice would be inauthentic.

Not all girls were as popular as Sophie and Maud, and some girls stated they merely strived to be average: to be neither singled out as

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popular nor as unpopular. Group 5 unanimously agreed that they did not want to be conspicuous on their first day at school:

Gülen: I don't know, that you... Not really. You want the attention, but not that much.

Linda: Yes. Mette?

Mette: Yes. Not standing out. Normal, like others.

Linda: Like others. Caruna?

Caruna: Yes the same. Not standing out. [Focus group 5, 8 May 2007]

In sum, the girls believed popularity had become more important, and most of them adapted their performances to this increased importance. Popularity is thus a performative construct: by naming it and acting by it, it becomes true. Sophie and Maud were both popular girls, at the top of the hierarchy at their former and their new schools. Their reflexive gossip is constitutive in the rules that govern behaviour at these schools, and logically they perform up to the standards that they and others have set. As De Waal (1989: 147-149) argues, girl culture is a practice ground, where girls learn about the world through constant observation. These observations are then thoroughly discussed, categorised and ranked amongst themselves. Girls like Mette were also aware of the rules, and, as the girls indicated, no-one wants to be at the bottom of the popularity hierarchy. Furthermore, the need for authenticity hinders them in 'admitting' such adaptations. Moreover, the need to be considered normal often implies not standing out at all, not calling attention to yourself in any way. I return to these themes in part III of this dissertation.

6.6 Conclusion: some methodological considerations

I set out to investigate the differences in identity performance between primary and secondary school. In the method chapter, I explained how ethnographic fieldwork proved impossible, as the 28 girls I kept in contact with went to eighteen different secondary schools. Instead, I interviewed some girls individually on location, and 21 girls in a focus group setting. Without participant observation in the new secondary schools, I had limited access to the actual performances of the girls at their new schools. Instead, I investigated how they talked about differences.

The very pragmatic changes that accompany the transition to secondary school have basic consequences for identity performance. The girls disposed of more time, more spaces and more practices for identity performance, with less adult supervision and control. At the new schools, there were more and previously unfamiliar people. To some

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girls this allowed a different performance than in primary school; to other girls it allowed new alignments and new friendships. Transition to secondary school also means entering the intelligence hierarchy. During this period in life, intellectual abilities need to be incorporated into the narrative of self. Furthermore, their place in the popularity hierarchy had become more important, which required more attention to appearance than a year before.

The transition to secondary school is a process best described as an evolution rather than a revolution. Girls are not lifted from one environment to be dropped into an isolated new setting. Instead, old friendships remain or evolve. Family relationships change, but again no demonstrable rupture occurs over the summer. More importantly, the ways girls talk about themselves and others change only slightly. These ways of speaking are known as repertoires. Although I discuss these extensively in chapter 10, I here point to one specific repertoire: that of authenticity. This repertoire limits the possibility of naming radical changes; most notably the repertoire of authenticity promotes continuity rather than change as a norm. The girls did not talk about how they had changed, because of the authenticity norm. Furthermore, as Giddens (1991: 186, 215) argues, individuals require a coherent narrative of the self. Faced with rapidly changing circumstances, the narrative of the self needs to be reflexively sustained. Authenticity is central to preserving an integral sense of self. The girls' use of the authenticity repertoire can therefore be seen as a way of dealing with changes. Coping with change implies an increased need for reflexivity, which shows, for instance, in the girls' continuous gossip.

The lack of articulation of difference brings forth some methodological problems. Although the girls had changed, the audience of their performance in these specific research settings had not. In the individual interviews they spoke to me as a researcher, just like the year before. In the focus groups, they talked amongst their old classmates. Had I been able to split myself up and conduct more participant observation, I might have observed how Consolacion became less "bitchy" amongst her new classmates (as Amisha assured me). I might have observed how Marisol blossomed into popularity (as I now assumed from her behaviour and self-assurance in the focus group). Then again, these changes did not constitute any radical break in identity performance. Furthermore, the need for authenticity caused the girls to stress continuance. 'Longitudinal' research strongly based on interviews should take this into account.